

T W I C E
B L E S S E D

On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish

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For Rebecca and Bruce

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adds a new dimension to our understanding of twentieth-century American Jewish history. While the stories of previous generations of lesbian and gay Jews can now only be reconstructed from often elusive records, Gerry's is the first generation whose experience need not be lost to us.

These essays will be discomfiting to readers who believe that historical truth can only be found by divorcing oneself from lived experience. We include them here precisely to challenge that assumption, and to inspire further research on lesbian and gay themes in Jewish history.

In God's Image: Coming to Terms with Leviticus

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Rebecca T. Alpert

JOAN AND LESLIE HAVE BEEN LOVERS FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS. THIS year, they decided to go home for the Jewish holidays to Joan's family in upstate New York. It was an important milestone. Joan's parents had become more comfortable with their daughter's lesbian life-style and lover; this would be a way of acknowledging the growth in the relationships among Leslie, Joan, her parents, and her younger brother.

Joan's family is deeply involved in their local Conservative synagogue, and it was truly an act of courage for all of them to go to Kol Nidre services together. Joan was excited—proud of her family and eager to reenter the Jewish life she had left behind. Leslie was scared, but interested in learning more about involvement in the Jewish community. Although Leslie's parents are Jewish, she was raised without religious training.

Yom Kippur evening turned out to be a good experience. The congregants were friendly and welcoming to Joan and her "friend." Religiously, too, the women were moved by the powerful experience of communal prayer. They decided that night to spend the entire next day in shul, continuing their fasting and waiting for the stirring blast of the *shofar* to bring an end to the day.

All went well until the afternoon service. The rabbi explained that for the Torah portion, they would be reading from the book of Leviticus, chapter 18, a description of forbidden sexual practices. Why read that on the holiest day of the year? No explanation was offered. As the Torah was read, Joan and Leslie followed along in the transla-

tion until they read the words: "Do not lie with a male as one lies with a woman; it is an abomination."¹

Joan and Leslie froze, recognizing the meaning for them as lesbians, even though the language refers only to men. They looked at one another, disappointment spreading across Joan's face while a tear formed in the corner of Leslie's eye, as if to say, "This place is really not for us, after all."

Three times a year, on Yom Kippur afternoon and then twice during the annual cycle of Torah readings, every year for the past 2,500 years, Jews around the world have listened to the public reading of the words of Leviticus declaring a sexual act between two men "an abomination." When the prohibition is read from Leviticus 20, during the third yearly reading, it is declared not only an abomination, but also a capital crime.

What could be more profoundly alienating than to know that the most sacred text of your people, read aloud on the holiest day of the year, calls that which is central to your life an abomination? What could be more terrifying than to know that what for you is a sacred loving act was considered by your ancestors to be punishable by death?

Coming to terms with Leviticus may be the greatest single struggle facing gay men and lesbians seeking to find a religious home within the Jewish community. Before we examine strategies for all of us to cope with this dilemma, we must understand the power and authority of this text: What is Leviticus, and why is it so important?

Leviticus is the third book of the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. These books comprise the story of the birth of our people and the beginnings of the Jewish legal system. Traditionally, they are understood as revelation—God's words, written down by Moses, God's prophet, on Mt. Sinai. Thus, these words are considered not only a record of our past, but God's explanation of God's will for the people of Israel as well. Laws codified in these books are the ultimate source of authority and are the starting point for the later development of Jewish civilization. According to strict interpretation of Jewish law, no law stated in the Torah can ever be nullified or abrogated.

Beyond its implications for the Jewish legal system, the Torah has deep symbolic power. It is preserved on a handwritten parchment scroll. It is kept in the ark, a sacred space at the front or center of

every synagogue, under a flame that burns perpetually. It is adorned with a special cover and ornaments. It is removed from the ark with great pageantry to be chanted aloud three times weekly. The public reading of Torah is the central event of the Sabbath morning service. To be called to the Torah to recite the blessing for reading from the scroll is a great honor. Blessing and reading from the Torah forms the central experience of the bar/bat mitzvah ceremony. (Imagine, if you will, the adolescent who thinks he or she might be gay having to read from Leviticus 18 or 20 at the rite of passage!)

Clearly, the words of the Torah cannot be dismissed lightly, nor would we wish them to be. The Torah contains concepts that are vital to us: that we should love our neighbors as ourselves and deal respectfully with the stranger, the poor, and the lonely in society. The Torah instructs us to all see ourselves as having been created in God's image, and therefore as the bearers of holiness in the world. It also contains wonderful and challenging stories of the world's beginnings and our people's journey from slavery to freedom.

Those of us who choose to remain identified with the Jewish tradition do so in part because of the foundation laid by Torah. We cannot simply excise what we do not like; it is our heritage and the primary text of our people. Yet a piercing question arises and reverberates through our lives: How do we live as Jews when the same text that tells us we were created in God's image also tells us that our sacred loving acts are punishable by death by decree of that same God?

This question may impel us to deny the power of Leviticus, but in truth we cannot. For all of us involved in any way in Jewish life, this text has authority. It has authority in that it is used by others to support the belief that homosexuality is wrong. (Of course, this is true not only for Jews. Leviticus is quoted by right-wing Christian religious groups to the same end.) And whether we ourselves consciously accept the authority of the text or not, we would be foolish to think that it does not affect us deeply, sometimes in subtle or insidious ways. For those of us who are lesbian or gay, it can undermine our pride in ourselves, feeding our own homophobia as well as that of others.

Let me suggest, then, three methods of coming to terms with Leviticus. We can, as did our ancestors, interpret the text to enable us to function with it on its own terms. We can, like biblical scholars, treat the text as a historical record and draw conclusions based on the way

it functions in a given context. Or we can encounter the text directly with our emotions and our self-knowledge, allowing it to move us to anger, and then beyond anger, to action.

Each method comes to terms with the text's authority in a different way. Through interpreting the text we stay within the system and re-direct it. Through historical reasoning we place limits on the text's authority by examining it with the lens of another system. Through encountering the text emotionally, we confront it and therefore use it as an instrument of transformation.

The Interpretive Method

Midrash—the process of making commentary to interpret the text—is a vital aspect of attempts throughout Jewish history to make the Bible come alive. Throughout the generations, interpreters have sought to make the text accessible to their contemporaries who may not understand its original meaning. The text may be ambiguous, unclear, or redundant. A word or custom may be unfamiliar and need explanation. One part of the text may contradict another part, and a resolution of the conflict is necessary. The same word or phrase may be repeated, seemingly without purpose, and commentators have sought to explain these repetitions by assigning different meanings to them. Finally, there are cases in which the grammar or syntax is unusual and lends itself to providing a new interpretation.

While interpretive methods are legitimate and widely practiced, it should be noted that many would claim that the text is not really in need of interpretation. It stands on its own as God's word.

With this understanding as our background, let us look at how Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 have been interpreted by traditional Jewish commentators. We find that this prohibition is mentioned less often than others in the Torah. Some have assumed that this lack of discussion is due to the fact that homosexuality was not common among Jews. Suffice to say that we can only speculate about the extent of homosexual practice, but we can say with certainty that the subject was not considered problematic enough to require extensive public discussion. For whatever reason, to be sure, homosexuality was not a visible issue in the Jewish world until contemporary times.

Most of the interpretations of Leviticus 18:22 hinge on an unclear word—*to'evah*—which is generally translated as “abomination.” In

fact, the meaning of this word is obscure. Therefore, interpreters have taken the opportunity to translate it in ways that explain the prohibition. After all, the text never tells us why lying with a man is *to'evah*, but only that it is.

What might *to'evah* mean? According to the second-century commentator Bar Kapparah, it means “*to'eh ata ba*—you go astray because of it” (see Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 51b). This play on words has been taken to mean that it is not intrinsically an evil to engage in homosexual acts, but rather that they have negative consequences. Bar Kapparah did not spell out those negative consequences—rather, it was left to later commentators to interpret his interpretation.

Certain medieval texts suggest that one is being led astray from the main function of sexual behavior, namely procreation. Some Rabbinic commentators assume that to go astray means to abandon your wife and to disrupt family life. This interpretation is reinforced by medieval commentator Saadiah Gaon's general pronouncement that the Bible's moral legislation is directed at preserving the structure of the family (*Eminot ve-Deot* 3:1). Finally, modern commentator R. Baruch Halevi Epstein, author of the commentary *Torah Temimah*, suggests that going astray means not following the anatomically appropriate manner of sexual union.²

The most well-known biblical commentator, Rashi, who lived in eleventh-century France, had but one comment on the subject. Wanting to make the text clearer to his readers, he explained rather graphically the meaning of the phrase, “as with a woman”: “He enters as the painting stick is inserted in the tube.”

In the contemporary era, traditional Jews have had to come to terms with the fact that gay men and lesbians have made ourselves a presence in the Jewish community. The most serious and thorough traditional response on the subject has been made by Norman Lamm.³ Lamm affirms the text as it is simply understood—a strong prohibition against homosexuality. While he claims interpretation to be unnecessary to explain the text, in fact, he makes an interpretation of his own of the meaning of *to'evah*: “The very variety of interpretations of *to'evah* points to a far more fundamental meaning, namely, that an act characterized as an abomination is *prima facie* disgusting and cannot be further defined or explained.”⁴ While the term *to'evah* is not a problem for Lamm, the fact that this is considered a capital crime is at least distressing. But since capital punishment was one of the things

the rabbis interpreted out of existence by making it impossible to convict someone of a capital crime, Lamn does oppose penalizing homosexual behavior.

It is not only Orthodox Jews who assert interpretations to substantiate their antihomosexual points of view. Note the following response by the well-known Reform rabbi, Solomon Freehof: "In Scripture (Leviticus 18: 22) homosexuality is considered to be an 'abomination.' So too in Leviticus 20: 13. If Scripture calls it an abomination, it means that it is more than a violation of a mere legal enactment, it reveals a deep-rooted ethical attitude."⁵

So far, we have examined traditional interpretations of the text. These interpretations either support the plain meaning of the text, explain difficult or unclear words in the verse, or use the text to create legal pronouncements on unrelated subjects.

Yet the interpretive method is also used to alter the meaning of other biblical verses, sometimes even contravening the original meaning. This fact creates an opportunity among contemporary commentators to alter or expand the meaning of our verse.

Contemporary commentators in the first instance see a contradiction between Leviticus 18: 22 and the idea as stated in Genesis that we were all created in God's image. This contradiction must be resolved. We must assume that those of us who were created lesbian and gay are also in God's image, and that acts central to our identity cannot therefore be an abomination.⁶

In another interpretation, it is pointed out that the text refers only to certain sexual acts, not to same-sex love relationships. Therefore, the text is not relevant to a style of life and love and family of which it was ignorant.

It has often been pointed out that lesbians are not included in the Leviticus prohibition. This fact has led to a variety of interpretations: that women's sexual activities don't matter, that lesbian activity is acceptable, or that the absence of this rule makes the ruling against gay men invalid.

Perhaps the text is addressing the issue of sexual experimentation. According to this interpretation, straight men who are considering a "fling" and in the process hurting their current partner should refrain from doing so.

Other commentators, including Arthur Waskow, have suggested that the text is only trying to tell us not to make love to a male as if he were a female—that is to say, gay love and straight love are indeed

different.' One should not be confused with the other. (The acts do not evoke the same feelings or fulfill the same commandments.)

To some readers, this whole process of textual interpretation may seem irrational and unnecessary, and even amusing. Why go to the trouble to validate this text? Why play by these rules? There are many gay and lesbian Jews who feel compelled by the absolute authority and immutability of the Torah text. For them this is the only solution that will enable them to affirm both their gay and Jewish selves, and help them to feel whole. And for all of us, as noted earlier, the traditional interpretations affect us in subtle and destructive ways. It is for these reasons that more creative work needs to take place in the area of interpreting the text.

Biblical Criticism

A little more than one hundred years ago, Jewish and Christian thinkers began to study the Bible as a document created by human hands. The early biblical critics' questioning of divine authorship is viewed as commonplace today, but in their times their views were heretical.

Biblical scholars sought to place the Bible in its context in the Ancient Near East. They explained much of what was unclear in the biblical text by reference to practices in other cultures. They explained redundancies as the result of compilation of documents by multiple authors. They introduced the concept of evolution and attempted to date biblical materials. Biblical critics developed sensitivity to nuances of the text, developing concerns about linguistic and literary patterns.

The viewpoint of biblical criticism enables us to look at our verse in its historical, linguistic, and cultural context and understand it in a new, more objective light. Of course, we must bear in mind that complete objectivity is unattainable. Even looking at the text from outside, we are bound by our own cultural norms and expectations. In truth, we are looking at our verse through another kind of lens. While we think the approach of biblical criticism is a valid way to look at the text, we do not think that we have found in this method a way of obtaining "the truth."

From this perspective we certainly see the simple meaning of the text—that in biblical times, homosexual acts were forbidden. Yet this method does not require that we affirm the truth of that reality for today. We can, as biblical critics, acknowledge the need for a reexamini-

nation of biblical norms. (After all, the Bible also countenanced other things we no longer accept as moral—slavery and a second-class status for women and people with disabilities, for example.)

Furthermore, we can explain why homosexual acts were considered *to'evah* from a different perspective, by examining parallel linguistic uses of the word. We discover that *to'evah* is actually a technical term used to refer to a forbidden idolatrous act. From this information, we may conclude that the references in Leviticus are specific to cultic practices of homosexuality, and not sexual relationships as we know them today. This explanation is supported by reference to the other legal condemnation of homosexuality in Deuteronomy, which directly interdicts homosexual practices related to cultic worship.

Second, we understand that much of the Bible is an effort to make the separations between acts considered holy and those considered profane, to create an ordered perception of the universe. Accordingly, the sexual prohibitions described fit into the larger category of laws about kosher foods, the separation of the sexes and their clothing, and the prohibitions against plowing with two types of animals and of mixing certain types of fabric. We can reexamine, today, which of these separations are still meaningful.

Looking at the text from the outside also enables us to explain the repetition of the law as being derived from two different sources, written at different times. So the death penalty may have been applied at one period in biblical history, but not at another time.

Through this approach, we are able to step back from the text and ask questions about how the text functioned. We can see from some of the suggestions above that the text functioned to keep order and define it and to separate the Israelite people from the practices of their neighbors. This gives us the opportunity to conclude that values may be disengaged from specific laws, and that there may be other means of perpetuating values if we indeed still share them today. Further, if we are not bound by the assumptions of divine authorship, we can assert that while the prohibition against homosexual acts functioned in its time, it is no longer appropriate to our ethical sensibilities today.

Encountering the Text

There is one last approach for coping with Leviticus. In this method, we confront the text directly. We do not look to the midrashist or the scholar to interpret the text for us. Rather we face the text in its im-

mediacy—seeking its meaning in our lives, coming to terms with all that implies, and then going beyond it.

To face the simple meaning of Leviticus is to acknowledge the source of much of lesbian and gay oppression. The Bible does tell us that sexual acts between people of the same sex are *to'evah*—an abomination—and that they are punishable by death. And we know very well that this text has given generations the permission to find those of us who are lesbian or gay disgusting, to use Norman Lamn's word, to hate us; and even to do violence against us.

In our encounter with Leviticus, we experience the pain and terror and anger that this statement arouses in us. We imagine the untold damage done to generations of men, women, and children who experienced same-sex feelings and were forced to cloak or repress them. We reflect on those who acted on those feelings and were forced to feel shame and guilt and to fear for their lives. We remember how we felt when we first heard those words and knew their holy source. And we get angry—at the power these words have had over our lives, at the pain we have experienced in no small part because of these words.

Then, if we can, we grow beyond the rage. We begin to see these words as tools with which to educate people about the deep-rooted history of lesbian and gay oppression. We begin to use these very words to begin to break down the silence that surrounds us.

We proclaim the two consecutive weeks in the spring during which these words are read (*Parshat Ahare Mot* and *Parshat Kedoshim*) as Jewish Lesbian and Gay Awareness Weeks. During this time we urge that Torah study sessions be held in every synagogue to open the discussion of the role of gay and lesbian Jews in the community. Those of us who can take the risks of visibility must make ourselves available to tell our stories—of our alienation from the community, and of our desire to return. Each of us can tell the story of what this prohibition has meant in our lives—how we have struggled with it, and where we are on the road to resolution. And we expect to be listened to, with full attention and respect, as we do so.

In this way, we can transform Torah from a stumbling block to an entry path. We become more honest with ourselves and with our community about the barriers to our involvement, about our need for separate places to worship, and about our demand to be accepted as an integral part of Jewish life.

Whether we try interpreting, criticizing, or confronting, there are

no easy answers for coming to terms with Leviticus. But we cannot desist from the challenge of finding creative solutions to deal with this dimension of our oppression. To be whole as Jewish lesbians and gay men we must acknowledge with what great difficulty those pieces of our lives fit together. But we must also demand—of ourselves and of our community—that those pieces be made to fit.

We marvel at the fact that words written thousands of years ago still have so much power to affect our lives. Words are powerful. Now it is up to us to make the words that will transform our lives and give new meaning to our existence as gay and lesbian Jews.

Speaking the Unspeakable: Gays, Jews, and Historical Inquiry

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Faith Rogow

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become not merely unspoken, but *unspeakable*.¹—ADRIENNE RICH

AS JEWS, OUR TIES TO HISTORY ARE NOT CASUAL, AND RIGHTLY SO. Our understanding of history shapes our view of economic, social, and foreign policy. Moreover, our religious identity is based on our understanding of our history. As noted historian Michael Meyer has explained:

For modern Jews, a conception of their past is no mere academic matter. It is vital to their self-definition. Contemporary forms of Jewish identity are all rooted in some view of Jewish history which sustains them and serves as their legitimation. . . . Traditional Jewish faith rests neither on abstract speculations nor on a revelation given to a single prophet: it is people's collective and continuing response to a Divine will manifest to it in the early stages of its historical existence and determining its fate down to the present time.²

As testimony to the importance of history in Jewish life, we have devoted significant communal resources to preserving our historical record, and we often gauge our people's future by how well we have passed down customs from one generation to the next. Given the cen-